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ABSTRACT

Even when the socioeconomic background is controlled, there is still a difference between blacks and whites in academic achievement. Studies have shown that, though social class is a factor in that difference, ethnicity is the primary factor. This report discusses ideologies that have tried to explain that ethnic difference. It discusses the cognitive deficit theory and the black inferiority theory. It also considers research focusing on the relationship between the culture of the black community and the learning and expressive styles of black children. The report maintains that black students use the relational approach to learning. But educators and psychologists value and reward only the analytical approach to learning. They have responded to the relational style and behavior by either ignoring them or attempting to erase them. The effect of that conflict on blacks is covered. A list of references is appended. (PS)

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THE BEHAVIOR AND STYLE OF BLACK STUDENTS

by

Alfreda Turner

(Dec. 1986)

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Persistant low academic performance is shared between Black Americans and other minorities with similar features - Chicanos, Indians, Native Hawaiians, and Puerto Ricans. Regardless of the group, children from poor families will do less well in school than children from affluent families. It is true that a high percentage of Black children come from poor families. Studies indicate, however, that even when the socioeconomic background is controlled, there is still a difference between Blacks and whites in academic achievement (J. Ogber, 1981). Statistics show a disproportionate number of Black students who are labeled hyperactive and consequently tranquilized; who are labeled mentally retarded and consequently placed in "special classes"; who are being suspended, expelled and pushed out of schools; and who are unemployed and over-represented in prison (J. Hale-Benson, 1986). This imbalance definitely suggests a need for a new conceptualization of the development and behavior styles of Black children.

Two ideologies exist which try to explain the behavior and style of Black children. The first is "cognitive deficit" theory. The deficit theory view Blacks as deprived and attribute it to genetic inheritance or environmental factors. An often cited study is one written by Patrick Moynihan, 1966. Moynihan concluded that a large segment of Black families were failing to instill strong positive orientations toward achievement within their children. He went on to argue that the "fundamental problem" confronting Black communities was a "crumbling" family structure which failed to provide Black children with apropriate orientations toward achievement, thereby creating a cycle. Educators and psychologists holding this view advocate the total eradication of the "inferior" traits. An example is Black English. It is thought of as an "underdeveloped version of standard

English" and a "non-logical mode of expressive behavior", lacking the "formal properties" necessary for the formulation of cognitive concepts. In the 1960's a swarm of remediation programs arose for Black students, such as Head Start, Upward Bound, Higher Horizens, High Potential, and Parent-Child Centers.

The second theory explains Black language and culture as being simply different. This perspective argues that Blacks have their own culture with its own child-rearing practices, creating distinctively Black instrumental competencies. The end result of these differences is viewed as inferior and insufficient, in other words, deviances from the norm. These differences are sometimes attributed to poverty and the harsh realities of coping with the Black ghetto environment. The difference theorist recognize that the performance deficit in disadvantaged chldren may be due to a variety of motives, attitudes, general approaches to tasks, and even to psychological defences that tend to be defeating in the school setting. It is thought that these "culturally deprived" Black children must be "culturally enriched" (G. Smitherman 1986, E. Zigler 1973). It is believed that compensatory programs should include changes on cognitive measures; include changes on measures of characteristics such as self-image, aspirational level, needs for self-achievement; should also include changes in attitude toward adults. All of these factors are relatively independent of formal cognitive development, but can reflect deviances in expected performance norms. A recommended goal is not only cognitive development, but modification of those motivational and emotional responses which prevent disadvantaged children from performing at the full cognitive capacity which they bring to the program.

These two theories underlie the rationale with which efforts are

made to help "disadvantaged" Blacks and other chidlren improve their school performance. Some positive results are evidenced, but they have not significantly changed the relative academic position of Black children, especially those of the inner city (Ogbu, 1978/McAdoo, 1981). To be effective in counseling Blacks, there must be an understanding of the influences controlling Black behavior. Counselors and educators should consider looking beyond the "deficiency" of the Black student to the learning environment (W. Hayes and W. Banks, 1980). The orientation of most education research is to minimize, decrease, or ignore differences between ethnic groups. There is strong support for the need to examine the attitudes that are shaped by one's ethnic culture (S.B. Sarasoy, 1973). Robert William's (1964) research finds that Black people are sufficiently isolated in this society to preserve and transmit cultural patterns.

"Blacks tend to belong to all-Negro churches, volunteer organizations, information groups, and to experience the bulk of their social interaction with other local Negroes, despite possible inter-social contacts in their work, school, and shopping activities", (J. Hale-Benson, 1986). D. Henderson (1967) presents data to show that Black youth tend to perform very much alike on measures of educational achievement, aspiration, and perceptions of life chances, even when economic status and family structure were controlled. Stodalsky and Lessor (1967) suggest that ethnic groups differ in their patterns of ability no matter what social class level is within the ethnic group. Their study further finds that social class variations within the ethnic group does not alter the basic organization or pattern of mental abilities peculiar to that group. It was previously believed that social class influences supercede ethnic group influences. A

particular note of interest is that the differences in mental abilities between lower class and middle class children were greater in the Black group than in the other groups. However, the middle class children across the groups resembled each other more that the lower class children across groups. Social class is a factor, but ethnicity emerged as the primary factor.

Most of the research comparing cognition has examined thinking in cultures that are geographically separated. There is a push by some scholars toward anthropological research. Ward states their view:

> "(They) argue that language and culture virtually program the mind so that the individual as a learner is both bounded and shaped according to the world-and-life view and the mental process styles of his culture. Others, such as Piaget and Chromsky, give a much larger place to constants in language, maturation, mental operations and universal interactions (such as cooperations, oppositions, exchanges) and a much smaller place to transmissions which vary from culture to culture."

Two cognitive styles of learning have been identified. Witken (1967) defines cognitive styles as "the characteristic of self-consistent modes of functioning found pervasively throughout an individuals cognitive activities" (perceptual and intellectual). Cognitive style refers to the process of utilizing "logical" skills. The first style of learning is analytical. J. Hale-Benson (1986) refers to these individuals as "splitters" - those who think attributes of a stimulus have significance only in reference to some total content. The second style of learning is relational. Users of the relational style are described by Benson as "bumpers" - individuals who think attributes of a stimulus have significance in themselves.

Following is an example of how an analytical person would function on a relational task, Asa Hilliard (1967):

"If this person were asked to learn an Afro-American dance, the analytical is very likely to draw feet on the floor and to break the dance down into steps and to try to learn the dance 'piecemeal'. It is also likely that the analytical will establish a 'standard' of performance which becomes 'right' or 'not right'. On the other hand, if a relational person is given an analytical task, a comparable translation will take place. Details are likely to be blurred, standards faintly adhered to or the dance itself may be modified with no real concern for right or wrong so much as 'fit' or 'harmony'. An example is 'The Wiz', a Broadway show that is a Black version of the Anglo-American story 'The Wizard of Oz'"

Schools reward only the analytical approach to cognitive organization. Students who have not developed these skills and those who function with a different cognitive style are poor achievers. Their failures are witnessed early in school, and worsen as they move to higher grade levels. The following table (I) developed by Rosalie Cohen (1969), summarizes the predicted achievement of students who function with high or low information in the analytical or relational mode.

Table I

Skills Information Combination	Orientation to School Requirements
High analytical skills high information	High achievement, high IQ high success in school
High analytic skills low information	High achievement, average IQ anxiety (overachievers)
High relational skills high information	Low achievement, high IQ behavior problem (underachievers)
High relational skills low information	Low achievement, low IQ Complete inability to relate to school; withdrawal and drop-out.

The schools overall ideology and environment reinforces behaviors associated with the analytic style, in addition, it rewards the development of that style of processing information. "Aspects of analytic style can be found in the requirements that the pupil learn to sit increasingly long periods of time, to concentrate alone on impersonal learning stimuli, and to observe and value organized time allotment schedules" (Cohen, 1969). There is a difference between children who use the analytical style and those who use the relational style. A child whose cognitive organization is relational is unlikely to be rewarded socially with grades, regardless of his native ability, the depth of his information, or his background experience. In fact he will probably be considered deviant and disruptive in the analytically oriented learning environment of the school. Cohen concludes that children who participate in structured families in "formal" styles of group organization function with analytical cognitive style. Those who live in more fluid families that she called "shared function" primary groups are more likely to utilize relational cognitive styles. The use of either style however, is not confined exclusively to any particular group or social class.

Thomas Kochman (1981) has taken it a step further and proposes that there is a major problem in the communication process between Blacks and whites. These cultural differences are covert, and there is little or no acknowledgement of these differences. Black and white cultural perspectives are reflected in the different meanings assigned to their own and each other's behavior. He went on to contrast some of these patterns of behavior that Black and white students display in the classroom. Kochman describes the style for the Black community people

as high-keyed, animated, interpersonal, and confrontational; showing characteristics of involvement which is heated, loud and generates affect. The white style - that of the white middle class- is seen as low-keyed, dispassionate, impersonal, and nonchallenging; showing characteristics of detachment which is cool, quiet, and without affect. He further describes specific attitudinal and behavioral differences. Excerpts from his book Black and White Styles in Conflict follow:

(Argument and Discussion)

Blacks distinguish between arguments used to debate a difference of opinion and argument used to ventilate anger and hostility. In arguments for persuasion, Blacks assume a challenging stance with respect to their opponents. They are not antagonistic, but rather contenders cooperatively engaged in a process that hopes to test through challenge, the validity of opposing ideas. Argument that is a ventilation of anger and hostility is more intense than in persuasive argument. Opponents are viewed as antagonist. Blacks are alert to those formal elements that distinguish them: not simply the presence of affect and dynamic opposition but the degree of their intensity and the direction of their forces. Whites fail to make these distinctions because arguments for them functions only to ventilate anger and hostility.

(Relation to Material)

Blacks present their views as advocates. They take a position and show that they care about this position. Present day whites relate to their material as spokesmen, not advocates. They believe that the truth or other merits of an idea are intrusive in the idea itself. How deeply a person cares about or believes in the idea is considered irrelevant to its fundamental value.

(Roles and Responsibilities)

Because Blacks admit that they deal from a point of view, they are disinclined to believe whites who claim not to have a point of view or who present their views in a manner that suggests that they do not themselves believe what they are saying. This is why they often accuse whites of being insincere. Another reason for misinterpretation and distrust of the dispassionate and detached mode that whites use to engage in debate is that it resembles "fronting", a mode that Blacks use when consciously suppressing what they truly feel or believe.

(Certifying Knowledge)

White students consider an idea authoritative when it has been published. They see their role and responsibility as limited to presenting the idea and its source accurately and showing its relevance to the topic under consideration. They do not see themselves as personally responsible for the idea or have any personal position on it at all. On the other hand, Blacks consider it essential for individuals to have a personal position on issues and assume fully responsibility for arguing their validity. Otherwise, they feel that

individuals would not care enough about truth or their own ideas to want to struggle for them. And without such struggle, the truth value of ideas cannot be ascertained.

(Turn-Taking)

Collision between Black and white students in the classroom are also caused by different procedures for turn-taking, or claiming the floor. The white classroom rule is to raise your hand, be recognized by the instructor, and take a turn in the order in which you are recognized. An individuals turn generally can be as long as the number of points he has to make that are related to the topic under discussion. Nonetheless, the "democratic" concern is that a person be granted a turn without having anything important or even relevant to say. The Black rule is to come in when you can. This means waiting until a person has finished some point, rarely more than two. It would be rude to attempt to claim the floor before at least one point has been made. Self-assertion is regulated entirely by one's assessment of what they have to say. If someone's turn fits within the prescribed order but he says nothing worthwhile others may challenge his assertion: "What did you come in with that for?"

Several studies have been conducted which support some of the forementioned claims. Three studies are summarized below. Reactions of white adults toward Black and white children were examined by Coates (1972). The conclusion states that the character traits of Black children were more often noted negatively than white children. A supporting study by Rubovits and Maehr (1973) had the following results: 1) white students received far more total attention than Black students; 2) fewer statements were requested of Blacks; 3) more statements of Blacks than of whites were ignored; 4) Black students were praised less and criticized more; 5) more statements were requested of gifted than non-gifted; 6) gifted students were criticized more than non-gifted students, even though there was little difference made in the spontaneous comments by the groups (Black students in the gifted group received the majority of criticism); 7) non-gifted Black students received more attention than gifted Black students.

In another study by Byers and Byers (1972), a film of a white teacher interacting with two white and two Black girls was analyzed. One student from each race was actively trying to get the teacher's

attention. The white girl looked at the teacher and was successful at catching the teacher's eye 8 out of 14 tries. The Black girl, doing the same thing, succeeded 4 out of 35 tries. It was suggested that the Black girl's attempts were timed differently, and that she and the teacher did not share the same set of expectations and understanding of the meaning of gestures.

Sarah Michaels (1980) conducted an ethnographical study of sharing time in an urban 1st grade, 50% white and 50% Black. She found significant differences between the oral presentation styles of the Black and white children. The white children used a style (topic centered) that was compatible with the teacher's notion of a good sharing episode. In contrast, the lower income Black children were far more likely to use a "topic-chaining" style - loosely structured talk that moves fluidly from topic to topic, dealing primarily with accounts of personal relations. The teacher seemed to have difficulty identifying the topic and understanding where the talk was going. Her questions, therefore, were often mistimed, stopping the child in the middle of a thought. Also, her questions were often inappropriate and seemed to throw the child off balance, interrupting his or her train of thought. Michael notes that this narrative style is the same one identified in informal home conversation and in conversations among peers outside the classroom.

Existing theories which use Anglo-American standards as the norm, and which are the basis for how academic professionals approach the task of educating Black children, have not been effective. Hence the high persentage of Black students that are school failures. Research has proven that there is a relationship between the culture of the Black community and the learning and expressive styles of Black

children. The relational style of learning has been identified as that used most by Black students. Specific behaviors have been described as culturally characteristic of Black children. Educators and psychologists have responded to these differences in style and behavior by either ignoring them or attempting to erase the behaviors. The question remains, what are the implications for educating Black children.

Much basic and descriptive research still needs to be done. Many professionals will want packaged strategies - simple "how to do it without thinking" tactics. The masses of Black children are in desparate need of an "appropriate education". They are deserving of more than the existing packaged curriculum which have been unthinkingly applied to the problems and issues faced by Black children in America (John Johnson, 1981). Curriculum revisions need the collective effort of trusted colleagues, and should not be put into practice without considered thought and judgement about local circumstances.

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